

A 500-Plus Ton Fishing Ship Refit to be an Exploration Megayacht

The Anne S. Pierce is one hell of a boat.



The Purpose Driven Yacht

It's a fishing vessel? It's a Coast Guard rig? It's the Anne S. Pierce and she's one of the most peculiar boats you'll ever see.



Photo: Legare Hay

One morning after running my son to school, I decided to head to downtown Charleston to spend the morning plinking the keyboard at my favorite coffee shop. I love the drive to town because the highway I take to the steeple-spired old city runs right above Charleston's Safe Harbor marina. If you're into boats, it's sometimes hard to keep your eye on the road because the marina's outer dock, affectionately known as the Mega Dock, regularly sees a litany of seriously interesting—and in some cases globe-circling—passagemakers.

This January morning was no exception. Down near the end of the Mega Dock, I caught a glimpse of a very unusual boat. She looked to be at least 100 feet long. Her steel hull was a dull blackish-blue. Perched atop that hull was an imposing gray pilothouse with a huge observatory of forward raked windows. Even a quick, rubbernecking glance said she was a boat meant for business, but what business? An Arctic research vessel? A radar-absorbing Coast Guard rig?

The answer came a few minutes later, in a message from a Facebook buddy

who also happens to be into boats. She was a fishing vessel called the *Anne S. Pierce*.



A fishing vessel at the Mega Dock? Well, not exactly. Google quickly gave me the name of a Newfoundland shipyard that had overseen what looked to be a jaw-dropping refit from a 130-foot, 500-ton north Atlantic scallop dragger to one hell of a purpose-built expedition rig.

A call to the local Safe Harbor office soon led to a call from a friendly gentleman who, in fact, owned the boat. He asked not to be identified for the story, so let's call him John Boatman—because he is most definitely a *boat man*.

A few hours later, Mr. Boatman was graciously welcoming me aboard a yacht quite unlike anything I've ever seen—and spinning a fascinating tale. He is,

not surprisingly, a man of means. He's also owned a litany of boats. When he was a young, athletic daredevil, Boatman liked to waterski and go fast. A Donzi speedboat thus fit the bill. He eventually came to own a cruiser too—a 66-foot Pacemaker—that carried his family to the Bahamas. "But I didn't know anything," he said. "I got it and tried to charter it—and you know none of that ever works out right? I said, *I don't want to do this. I want to run my own boat.* So, I had Don Aronow build me a 36-foot Cigarette."

The Cigarette was perfectly happy making Florida-Bahamas runs, but, said Boatman, when he bought a home in coastal Maine not too far from the headquarters for Hinckley, the roaring, in-your-face ocean racer didn't really match the local vibe.

Motoryacht Anne S. Pierce

Have a closer look at this beautiful refit in the gallery below:

Boatman became fascinated, though, with the Maine boating culture—especially the lobster boat racers. "They build these paper-thin lobster boats—and they build these 1,000 horsepower gasoline engines—and put them in these lobster boats," he said. "Oh my God. They drag race with them. It's a whole world of boating most people don't even know exists."

Boatman had to have one, but took it to a different extreme. He asked an outfit called Pettigrew Boats to work with Maine's renowned Young Brothers, builder of some of the best of these racing hulls, in crafting him a 38-footer. He'd source an engine from the same Mercury Racing crew that custom built his Cigarette engine. When A.P. Pettigrew asked what his plans were for the boat, "I said, 'I'm not gonna race it,'" said Boatman. "I'm gonna do the whole boat in mahogany." Pettigrew said, "You will sink the damned thing."

But she didn't sink. Boatman showed the mahogany machine to Bob Hinckley and his partner Shep McKenney. "She was gorgeous," he said. "The

whole boat was wood on top with this big Mercruiser on back. They were impressed. Lo and behold, the next year I come up to Maine, and Hinckley's built a 42-foot powerboat on a lobster boat hull."





Photo: Legare Hay

The Anne S. Pierce is a 500-plus ton ship built to fish the most inhospitable waters on earth. Her owner turned her into a stunning exploration vessel. From a failure-proof wood-stove to uncomplicated electronics, she's built for comfort, reliability and sidling up alongside icebergs.



When Boatman finally started to back out of working long hours for a company he'd run for nearly 50 years, he took to touring with his lifelong best friend—whom we'll call John Honda—on motorcycles. "And I turned this ankle completely backwards," Boatman said pointing to his foot. "I said, you know, we can get killed doing this. We're getting too old. We're both retiring. John says, 'Well, you know, I always liked boats. Want to buy a big boat?'"

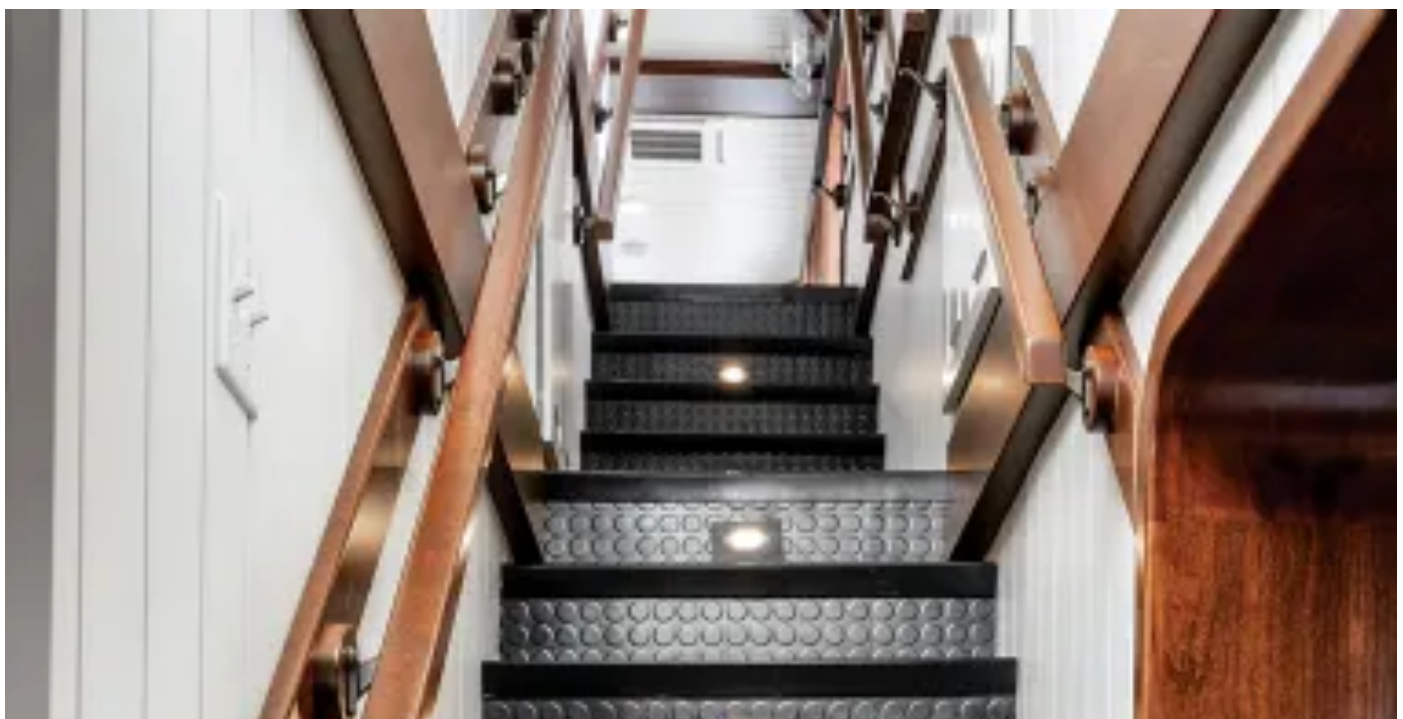
Boatman reached out to buddy Bruce Kessler, a man who directed film and TV shows including *The Fall Guy*, *MacGyver*, *Mission Impossible* and *The A-Team* and raced cars with the likes of Dan Gurney. In the mid-70's, Kessler had contracted Seattle's Delta Marine and naval designer Steve Seaton on

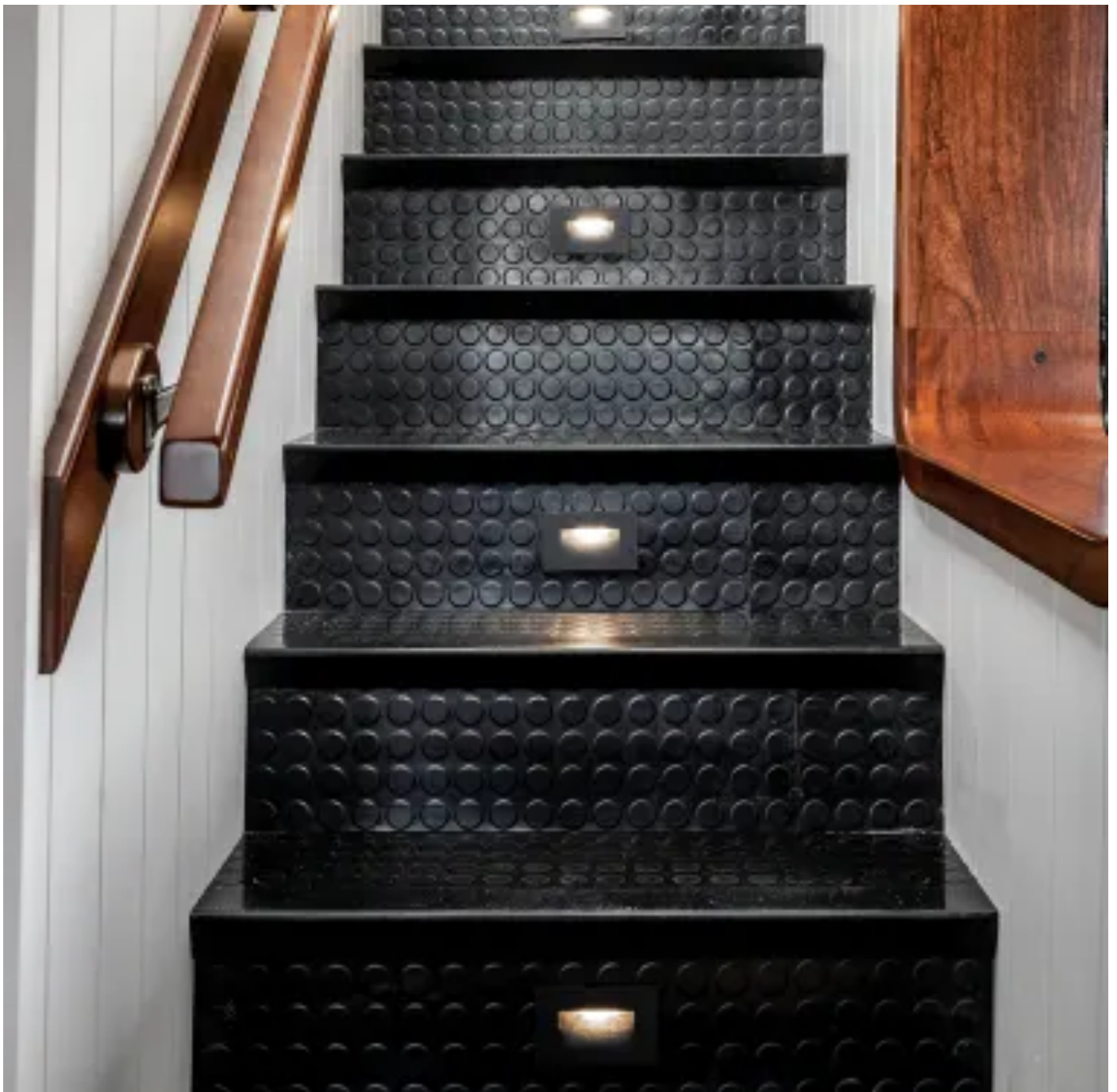
Zopilote, a 70-foot fiberglass yacht based on a full-displacement, crab seiner hull. Kessler and his fishing-fiend wife Joan would pilot *Zopilote* around the world.

"I said to Bruce, I'm thinking of, of actually going somewhere. What would you buy? He says, 'Buy a Nordhavn. They're good boats. Full displacement, well-made, yada, yada, yada.' And I was still, well, I don't wanna go eight knots. So, he said, 'Well, buy a Fleming.'"

So, Boatman bought a Fleming 55. "It's a good, entry level boat," he said. "They wrap you up in service. They teach you to run it. It's a good place to start."

Boatman and Honda signed on a highly experienced captain (and current yacht broker) named Andrea Gaines who could not only navigate but teach the pair serious offshore seamanship. A 65 Fleming soon followed, but a big gale off Jacksonville convinced Boatman that if they were going to captain farther offshore, a deep displacement, steel-hulled machine was called for. That came in the form of a 75-foot trawler from North Carolina's Custom Steel Boats. It had been built for Jeff Drupek, today the CEO of Outer Reef yachts. "I got down to 8, 9 knots and I just fell in love with it," Boatman said.





With a steel hull, 14 feet of draft, and honest to goodness bricks around her woodstove, the Anne S. Pierce is built more like the Queen Mary than a modern superyacht. Her classic cherrywood, shiplap and mohogany interior is a completely modern design —from another era.





Soon, though, heavier passages and heavier water—the Northwest Passage and the Bering Sea beckoned. The Outer Reef wasn't long enough to counter the rolling of very heavy seas. Eventually, Boatman traded her for an 85-foot Northern Marine trawler. "We circumnavigated from Labrador all the way out to Prince William Sound," he said. "We went through the Panama Canal. We went all over the place."

But like any good entrepreneur boat addict, Boatman's mind was always turning—and it kept turning to the deep draft and tapered hull of vintage Feadship boats. "They all have that same sailboat stern—where she looks like a cocktail glass," he said. "It just rides beautifully."

Then one day in 2019, an unusual boat popped onto his iPad screen. She was called the *Anne S. Pierce*.

The big steel hulk was built in 1982 as a scallop dragger. She was 124 feet long, sported a 26-foot beam and a draft of 14 feet. Her fuel tanks held 21,000 gallons and burned around 26 gallons per hour at 9.5 knots—enough for her single 1100 horsepower 16-cylinder D399 Caterpillar to take her 7673 nm. Her displacement? 1,280,000 pounds.

The ship—and she was a ship—had been designed to head out into the teeth of 60-knot North Atlantic gales and make it home safely with 500,000 pounds of scallops and ice in her hold. After doing a couple decades of hard

time along the North Atlantic, she became a maritime training and research vessel for Newfoundland's Memorial University. Due to age and corrosion, she was unable to pass pending Transport Canada certifications for a commercial boat without a substantial restoration. So here she was for sale, rough around the edges, but in running condition. "It was beat to crap and looked terrible, so there was no market for it," said Boatman. "It had everything set up on it for research. But it had the Feadship stern. Very unusual—with a soft chine. She's made from American steel from the late 70s. The best steel ever."

Boatman spoke to naval designers and architects of high pedigree, including Steve Seaton and David Menna of DFD Marine in Ft. Lauderdale. Seaton said, 'Just buy the damn thing,' recalls Boatman. "'I can make a real boat out of that.'"



Photo: Legare Hay

Menna has devoted much of his life to building and refitting big ocean boats for both civilian and official use. He recalled his first meeting with Boatman: "He said, 'Listen, I want to be on an open flybridge with an ice storm hitting

me in the face, chasing polar bears until the day I die.' That's the type of boating he wants to do. It has nothing to do with flash. Nothing to do with status. He buys a yacht, not because of the yacht, but because it's a boat. He does like the comfortable interior, which anybody would. But he doesn't care what other people think. His idea of a boat is to do things with a boat that you can't do otherwise. You experience weather that you don't see. You can get to places you can't get to in any other way. That's why I like boats too."

Before buying the *Pierce*, Boatman spent a great deal of money and time on deep and detailed inspections. He also reached out to Leon Dowden, president of Glovertown Shipyard in Newfoundland. Dowden's family-run yard had a reputation for stellar builds and refits on very tough fishing boats that navigate hellish conditions.

"He told me, 'I'm tired of going into working ports with a big shiny boat,'" recalled Dowden. "'We get hassled all the time. And I was sitting in the harbor and I saw this fishing boat. A rough looking boat—and nobody even looked at it. We want something, you know, not fancy and shiny, just nice inside—like a home."

"Seaton said he could fix it," added Boatman. "Menna, the architect said, 'Yeah, let's just strip everything out, throw it away, and just start over again.'"

Because the *Pierce* had a small wheelhouse, and a big, open back deck, Dowden reckoned he could replace it with a much larger, custom pilothouse and salon. "And the fish hold was very deep and empty—very easy to convert," Dowden said. Boatman, he added, was particular in what he wanted, but was also flexible when it came to ideas and not cutting safety corners. "Before we started, the owner said, 'Just keep me out of the lifeboat.' But he was engaged in the whole process. Every day. I was on the phone with them. On the weekends though, come Friday afternoon, he would not call me, and I wouldn't call him. He respected that time."

Seaton designed the boat, Menna was responsible for bringing those designs to life. When everything was gutted, every spot of corrosion was dealt with, and hull panels were heated to make sure they maintained their form. Many were replaced.

To build the interior, Dowden recommended an unusual choice—a kitchen designer named Kevin Walsh whose Canadian company, YourStyle Kitchens, was known for scrupulous work. Walsh's high-end CAD software could render virtual walkthroughs. "I modeled up the entire room—set it all up," Walsh said. "And I was in."

After a great many renderings and even spray-painted floorplans at the base of the fish hold, the team came up with a four-stateroom configuration, with big, beautifully tiled bathrooms and a six-bed bunkroom for kids. The build was not easy. Nothing, from the water-draining, angled floors, to the hull sides, was level. The layout had to work around bulkheads and every door (most are appointed with gorgeous bronze portal windows) had to be unique. "We tried to do little gaskets on the doors and everything to stop rattling noises," said Walsh. "And in the kitchen, we're trying to fit appliances—and there's absolutely no levelness."

Appliances aboard are literally from Home Depot. "I've had all the fancy yacht equipment and all of it breaks," Boatman said. "If this doesn't work, there's a Home Depot everywhere."

Serviceability was also behind the decision to fill the *Anne S. Pierce* with individual mini-split induction heat pumps instead of a big central climate control. Again, easy to replace at a Juneau big box store. Rearward of the kitchen is a huge aft dining area and a comfortable lounge seating area with a massive bank of thick, Diamond Sea Glaze windows. The center of attention is an honest-to-goodness wood-burning stove underlain with a full brick and steel fire barrier. "That's my backup if the climate system fails," said Boatman. "There's nothing like a fire. It's just fabulous."

“Having a fireplace on the ship—it’s not normal,” said Walsh. “So the biggest thing too, was trying to make everything all around noncombustible.”

Sealed behind a massive watertight door, the blinding white engine room is a place of wonder. All the wires, pipes, hoses and ancillary components for the massive Caterpillar D399 engine were replaced for the refit. But Boatman also wanted to keep things primitive, from the mechanical fuel injection to air-compressors whose tanks start the 16-cylinder, 64-liter motor, to the two massive Cat generators that spin out electricity and power hydraulics that drive the bow thrusters, windlass and capstans.

The D399 is old enough to comply with early tier, while also being efficient and reliable. “It sips fuel,” said Menna. “And you can lose 12 of the 16 cylinders and it’s still gonna run. It just doesn’t care. It’s a beast.”

Other components, Boatman added, are designed for simplicity too. The gearbox drives a simple 96-inch propellor. A ‘smart’ electronic switchboard would have cost a million dollars and have been corrosion sensitive. Instead, safety components were upgraded and refreshed and the mechanical control boards were left in place.

There’s only one fully new component in the engine room—a third Cat 2.2 backup generator. “The only microchip in this engine room is that generator,” said Boatman.

Up top, the pilot house salon and flybridge are just incredible. The new 20,000-pound pilot house structure was built in two pieces indoors at Glovertown and then craned up and welded together on the deck. To ensure that it wouldn’t make the boat too top heavy—and to replace the weight of a half-million pounds of scallops, Boatman had 350,000 pounds of concrete poured into the hull. At the rear of the pilothouse is a bed for the navigator and a balcony—oh and there’s another woodstove to boot— built by the same foundry that cast the steel for the hull. The pilot houses’ reverse-raked forward windows are just massive, and on this late day, 360 degrees of glass

gave a stunning, panoramic view of Charleston Harbor.

Electronically, while the *Anne S. Pierce* has modern satellite communications including Starlink, KVH telephone and TV, Boatman again favored tried-and-true systems at the gorgeous three-seat helm. The seafloor is visualized with a vintage Furuno system that Boatman likens to an old-school Macintosh vacuum tube stereo amplifier. "It's from the 90's, but it's still supported," said Boatman. "We also have a 25-kW commercial radar and time-zero software running off a new marine PC. The boat doesn't have electric switching and all the systems—including the joystick control—are independent."

Taking in everything from the flybridge during a postcard sunset, I come to a full realization of just what a spectacular piece of engineering this boat is. Hidden in the Glovertown-built smokestack, an inexpensive, hand-cranked dumbwaiter runs clear down to the kitchen. Gazing out over the main deck, you could navigate from the fully-equipped outdoor helm. The array supporting the navigation lights can be lowered on a hinge for easy replacement of any bulbs.

The following morning, while bucking along aboard a center console with a photo crew in a pissing gale, I would marvel as *Anne S. Pierce* flattened the swells like a tank. But late this afternoon, we leaned out over the flybridge and took a final moment to appreciate the huge Lowcountry sky and this huge boat. I really can't get over her. She's just so well-built, so unique and so damned capable. What Boatman started out with was worth very little. What he's managed to build, is simply priceless.

